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BY THE

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THE CHURCH'S SHADOW.

I WAS taking a solitary ramble through the quiet fields and lanes. A chill February evening was closing in. The pale, watery beams of the setting sun were scarcely able to struggle through the leaden veil of clouds which hung over the skies. Damp wreaths of mist were settling heavily upon the cheerless shrubs, and straggling branches of the trees. All was still, save when the dull, indistinct sounds of the distant hamlet on the hill-side fell at intervals on my ear; or the monotonous cawing of the rooks, as they sailed slowly over head on the way to their home among the distant elms, gave notice of approaching night. At length I found that I had reached the gate of the village Churchyard; and, in a manner instinctively, I approached it, and resting my arms upon the rails beside it, I soon became lost in many thoughts. Suddenly the last rays of the sun broke forth, and shed a farewell flood of yellow lustre on the peaceful little Church. Strong and clear its shadow fell across the Churchyard, and the green hillocks, and white stones, which marked the resting-place of the dust and ashes committed to its charge for yet a little while. Not many yards from my feet an open grave lay awaiting another tenant; and it was evidently intended for the reception of one who had been early called away from this transitory life, into that place where early and late must cease for ever.

After some little time I became so far absorbed in my own thoughts, that the indistinctness of the evening shadows which were gathering round, and the indistinctness also of my own shadowy thoughts, clothed the objects before my eyes with a vague colouring, and brought, uncalled, many fresh objects before my mind's eye; the inner creations of the mind strangely mingling and blending with the outer scene before me, until the two were so closely and harmoniously blended and interwoven, and melted into one another, as to form one whole vision, in which what belonged to each was not to be consciously distinguished.

I gazed upon the Church's lengthening shadow, until it seemed to me as though it had overspread the whole neighbourhood of the Church, even as far as the dim hamlet on the side of the hill. There it lay,—gently embracing within its folds the Churchyard and the graves; the quiet parsonage, and the village school; the bridge and the mill; the farm, the gabled inn, and the labourer's cottage; the sheepfold, the trees, and the green; and many a patch of field and garden interspersed, falling on all alike;—the abodes of men, the objects of human industry and human care; the graves of the dead; the cattle even; the works of nature, and the house of GOD: in a manner binding them in one, without constraint, unfelt, unthought of even by all. There it lay, and, transient as it was, I felt as though this mighty shadow had not now, for the first time, overspread these places, but rather was a thing to which they had, like myself, become unconsciously habituated, as to the daily return of the sun, or the rising of the moon, or the gentle sound of the breeze, and the melody of the birds among the branches. There was a strange mystery in it; for although the shadow on which I gazed was, as I have said, strong and clear, still it was, in a manner, dark without gloom, and shining without brightness. I could not understand how it was; I cannot describe it. A passage of Holy Writ, which is often present to my mind, occurs to me as the only language by which I can in any way attempt to describe the unearthly appearance which I beheld:—"It shall come to pass in that day, that the light shall not be

clear, nor dark; but it shall be one day which shall be known to the LORD, not day nor night: but it shall come to pass that at evening-time it shall be light."* Accordingly I perceived that, although the shadowy brightness evidently was reflected from above, this light was not that of the sun, nor yet of the moon; for indeed the sun had, by this time, just set, and the moon was but a light, thin crescent of pale silver in the west; and yet, as the twilight deepened, the unearthly shadow seemed to brighten, and to gain vividness, as well as shape, brought out by the closing darkness into clearer light, while the natural day shadows were waxing faint, and waning away. Nor was this all; for I could see at a glance that it brightened or darkened, in the various spots on which it fell, according to some hidden sympathetic or opposing influences which were at work therein. But, whether brightening or darkening, there it was, resting upon all, enfolding all, and claiming each spot as its own.

While I was musing, the Church door opened, methought, of its own accord, and I perceived, as it were, a long and wide burnished gleam of this mysterious shadow reflected from the surface of the water in the font beside the door, as it had been the flood of splendour which would dazzle the eye, if at sunrise it were to look across the watery mirror of the calm ocean, or rather of a sea of glass, like unto crystal. And still was it mild, and still was it awful; and I felt almost as though I ought to turn away mine eyes: but as I looked round, I saw a quiet group approaching at some little distance behind me. They were men and women, and one bare a little infant in her arms. I could scarcely distinguish the features of the babe, for the shadows of night fell wrathfully and gloomily athwart its brow, and it seemed as one without life. Suddenly the Church's shadow fell upon the face of the little one, and it came forth, out of darkness, into marvellous light. It was a steady, sure, unflickering ray, and it seemed to bathe the infant through and through, and to come in even unto its soul. From being dead it was quickened, and new-born; it was illuminated and lived. And I heard

* Zech. xiv. 6, 7.

low sounds of prayer ascending, and when a gentle breath of strange wind, blowing where it listed, but whence and whither proceeding I could not tell, brought the sounds past my ear, I caught the words,—"that this child may lead the rest of his life according to this beginning."

At this moment methought I heard the merry ring of children's voices; and on turning towards the spot from whence it came, I beheld a knot of rustic boys and girls, just freed from school at the close of day; and down as far as the little wicket, and through the old ivy-clad porch, and into the vacant school-room itself, there, full and flat, slanted the same glorious shadow. It rested on the Bibles and the Prayer-Books, and lighted up the Scripture prints and texts upon the walls, and caused the hands and figures on the clock-face to glitter like precious stones; and, in a word, it filled all the place with a supernatural beauty. It fell, too, upon the children themselves, who were at their sports on the village green hard by; yet, falling on all alike, not from all alike did it shine back in beauty. And as I watched more narrowly, I perceived that it waxed from time to time more dim or bright on each. To those who appeared to love it, it was brightness; to those who little esteemed it, it was shade. Like the thick mantling pillar of the cloud in the wilderness, it was a cloud and darkness to the one, and it gave light to the other. And I marvelled much when I beheld these things, perceiving, as I did, that the heavenly shadow fell, as the sun rises, on the evil and on the good, on the just and on the unjust. And when I thought to understand this, it was too hard for me; so I left it to Him Who dwelleth in the sanctuary, the Merciful and the Just.

"He only can the cause reveal,
Why, at the same fond bosom fed,
Taught in the selfsame lap to kneel,
Till the same prayer were duly said,

"Brothers in blood and nurture too,
Aliens in heart so oft should prove;
One lose, the other keep, Heaven's clue;
One dwell in wrath, and one in love."

The merry sound of childish voices had died away upon the ear, as each had sought his own among the cottages for the night; and I turned to look upon these different village homes, in which, unmarked by any but myself, the shadow fell. And now my eye rested upon a low thatched cottage, not far from the Church. I could have fancied, from appearances, that some hand which had been accustomed to arrange and keep in orderly array its few objects of usefulness or ornament, had been for some time wanting. Here a straggling bough was cumbering the narrow path; there a trailing branch hung in disorder down the whitewashed wall; and evergreen creepers were flaunting, untrained and unclipped, around the lattice-work of the wooden porch; and the dead leaves had drifted into damp, mouldering heaps along the untrimmed borders. The humble casement was swinging sullenly and slowly to and fro, creaking and groaning in the melancholy gusts of the wind. I looked in, and the ruddy blaze of the domestic fire shot up, and filled the whole room with light. It flickered on the neat work-table and work-box, and its contents; it flowed across the dark face of the little instrument, which had ceased its music; it gilded afresh the few picture frames, and spread, with quivering, fantastic imagery, broad and bright across the ceiling. But the room was tenantless: no living being was to be seen, except a large, handsome Newfoundland dog, which lay on the hearth-rug, turning his anxious eyes ever and anon towards the door, as though he looked for the entrance of some well-known and well-loved face. And now he would rise up, and move towards the closed door, and stand mute and motionless, gazing and listening; and then would he slowly turn back, as I fancied, disappointed and dejected, and lie down in his old accustomed place. But in the room above, I saw a dim light proceeding from a carefully shaded taper, and scarcely serving to reveal to me the little history of what I had beheld. There, on a low couch, methought lay a worn and wasted figure; I could see that death had breathed upon her brow. Deep and sharp were the lines traced on her pale features; the bright eye within its sunken, hollow cavity, was only as a lamp in the sepulchre. Her white form

lay calm and still as a snow-flake, slowly and imperceptibly waning and sinking into the earth. There she lay, waiting for death. And beside her sat one, with a little child upon his knee; he did not speak, nor move; his eye was fixed steadily on the ground, almost as though he might be striving to scan some mystic characters inscribed thereon, which might unravel a mystery, or afford him consolation. His heart knew its own bitterness. I suppose that neither I, nor any one but those who have shared it, could intermeddle with the depths of that woe. It would seem as though he would perforce refuse to be comforted, but go down into the grave with her, mourning. Presently the Church's shadow stole quietly upon that humble roof. At once the sickly taper's solitary gleam was swallowed up in the mysterious cloud of unearthly splendour. The wan and wasted features beamed with hues which they had never known in health, with an unutterable radiance, as it had been the face of an angel; the long, slender fingers were lifted up and clasped together; and forthwith the frail tenement of flesh, bathed in this light, was transfigured with a more surpassing beauty and comeliness, than of flesh and blood at its best estate. Her eyes were no more burning with fever-fires; their light was as it had been a calm, clear shining after rain. She appeared to be gazing earnestly at some things which were not seen,—things not temporal; and to be listening attentively to some sounds which none heard but herself, and not with the outward ears. The little room underneath too looked no longer desolate in its cheerfulness; the merry lights, which had danced and flickered from the genial hearth, had paled away, and become lost in the overwhelming glory of the celestial shadow. The garden was no longer as a wilderness; seen in the radiance of that blessed shade, its memorials appeared more beautiful than they could have done had they flourished and shone in the gayest attire, and brightest earthly light.

Again I looked upon him who sat stupified with that earthquake of woe, which had overthrown his heart's surest and loftiest hopes. And very sad did I feel was the sight. Broad and full fell the holy gleam upon his countenance also, but not

in him did it light up and inflame glowing thoughts of hope, and bright musings of resignation; and as I looked upon him, and upon the faithful dog beneath, I could not help contrasting the utter despondency and unhappy selfishness of his grief, with the unselfish devotion and patient submission of the lower creature. The holy shadow which fell upon the one, in such unrestricted majesty, did not, as far as I could see, fall certainly upon the other at all, or it fell so vaguely and so partially, that I could not comprehend how far the dumb animal groaned and travailed together in spirit with its master, as a fellow-heir of vanity and sorrow; or whether the holy shadow was to deliver this brute beast, in any, and in what degree, from the bondage of corruption, by which the whole creation had in Adam been enslaved and shackled until now. And yet the other seemed to grieve with no better grief than this beast that perisheth. He sorrowed, I feared, as those who have no hope; and yet I felt that it must be a selfish sorrow, which could desire to cloud with earthly shadows the exceeding bright lustre which streamed upon that house of mourning.

And now the little child was quietly beckoned by its mother to her bedside. It was the hour of prayer. I saw the child, like a closing flower at even, weary, and desiring its rest, sink on its knees, and lowly and reverently raise up towards Heaven its simple prayers and praises, as an odour of a sweet smell. And again the supernatural wind swept by, and I heard the soft and regular chime of childish devotion borne to my ear from the sick chamber; and once I thought that there were two voices, blended as one,—the lisping voice of childhood, and the broken accents of womanhood, in a subdued and tranquil undertone, mingling together words which sounded to me like these, "Thy will be done in earth as it is in Heaven."

I heard also the words added, "Give us this day our daily bread;" but it seemed as if they vibrated from a secret chord which had been struck some time before, and which murmured still with a deep mysterious thrill. As the words "daily bread" fell from her lips, she seemed unconsciously to wander back to some scene of tranquil rapture. She turned her eyes, with

an expression of full satisfaction, towards the Church; and I caught the words, "spiritual food and sustenance,"—"so divine and comfortable a thing,"—"spiritually eat the Flesh of CHRIST, and drink His Blood,"—"body and soul unto everlasting life:" and with the words "angels and archangels" on her lips, she sank back faint and exhausted. Whether she slept I could not tell: but he who sat watching beside her was near enough to distinguish whether she breathed.

At length I beheld a little band of villagers approaching, whose slow and measured steps, so unlike those which I had seen twinkling upon the village-green, and whose snowy veils and sable vestments proclaimed that they were bringing all which could die of mortality to its sojourning-place. As they approached nearer, I saw the coffin borne by six, whose stature might have fitted the coffin which they carried. A few flowers were scattered upon the top, and twined along the sides. I could see that the one who was sleeping on, and taking her rest in that quiet couch, had indeed come up, and been cut down like a flower. Short and narrow was the bed of her breathless slumbers; and they who bare the form which therein slept on, and took her rest, seemed to feel it but a light burden. And many followed. And now they drew nigh to the Churchyard gate; and as I looked, I saw that the awful shadow rested, with an unspeakably greater glory than I had yet seen, on the melancholy pageant. It was as it had been the glow of a setting vernal sun, yet gorgeous and glorious beyond all expression. And now was I more than ever struck by the wonderful variation with which it appeared to affect those who beheld it. The side of the coffin which was next to the Church, and to its shadow, gleamed and glistened, and became shining, exceeding white as snow; the nails in the coffin, and the funeral paraphernalia, sparkled like stars on a dark sky; the flowers which had been sprinkled and wreathed upon the coffin, and were already faded, or fading, recovered their strength, and although cut down, dried up, and withered beneath the evening sky, they became green as when they grew up in the morning. The tears which were shed upon the coffin seemed as showers of light descending

in the dews of heaven; and when some few sighs came from that side, to my ears they seemed as solemn songs in the night, as strains of joy in much affliction. Nor could I discern the noise of joy from the noise of weeping; but they were calm and holy, and once they became so articulate, that I distinguished plainly the words, "Death is swallowed up in victory."

On the contrary, those who looked at the coffin on the other side, that farthest from the quarter whence the shadow fell, they did not seem to observe these most wondrous effects. On that side the coffin reflected no brightness; all looked dark, and cold, and cheerless. The very clearness of the light seemed to show to them but more plainly the strength and depth of the riveting nails and iron clasps; the flowers on that side seemed so faded, withered, and dried up, that they could never live again; the tears which fell from those who gazed on that dark side, seemed to me as the big heavy drops preluding the thunder storm; and the sighs which laboured in their surcharged bosoms were as the gathering groans of the gale, when the trees of the wood are moved with the wind. I thought them of all men most miserable. It seemed a wonderful and horrible thing that they should close their eyes against such bliss,—that they should choose for light, darkness; for warmth, chillness; for incorruption, corruption; for glory, dishonour; for power, weakness; for life, death. And I wondered much that they did not seem to perceive that the new-dug grave was shining forth all the while with such dazzling brightness, that it seemed a very doorway opened into another world, and leading to the Source itself of light. By the light of that shadow, I was enabled to read on a tombstone the inscription, "Blessed are the dead which die in the LORD, they rest from their labours." And I said, who shall venture to indulge the wish that we could rob them of their rest, and restore to them this world in exchange?

"Far better they should sleep awhile
Within the Church's shade,
Nor wake, until new heaven, new earth,
Meet for their new immortal birth,
For their abiding-place be made."

Suddenly the Church bell smote heavily upon my ear; the funeral knell was sounding. I started from my musings. The sun had long set; the Church's shadow had gone. I could have wished to connect again the broken links of my reflections, but in vain; unbidden had they come, and were not to be recalled at my bidding. Still I lingered awhile at the Churchyard gate, and still, as I fancied, felt the shadow which I could no longer see; and as I looked upon the little grave open beside me, I said, Surely the shadow is truth. As I spoke, I heard a softly-gliding step advancing close to me, before I had become aware of it. I had scarcely looked up, when I heard, from the lips of one in white array, the words, "I am the Resurrection, and the Life, saith the LORD: he that believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in Me shall never die." Then I turned round, and the funeral train was now really at the gate. And so they advanced, and passed on. I followed. After awhile they were seen around the grave. I stood not far from the group whom men call mourners. Then we separated; the dust and ashes to its sojourning-place, and we to ours.

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